Perfect Sound Forever
online music magazine presents...

Toshimaru Nakamura
sound student

photo by Kazue Yokoi

by William Meyer
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Points to make:

Some music hits you over the head, but not Toshimaru Nakamura's. The Tokyo-based improvisor is almost a bystander in his own music; he cultivates both physical and musical stillness, the better to ensure that he never makes a false gesture. Nakamura started out playing guitar, but in 1997 he put it aside and began playing the mixing board. He jacks the board's output into its input to create a feedback loop which, by judiciously twisting a knob here and there, he tweaks into sounds ranging from piercing high tones and shimmering whistles to galumphing, crackle-spattered bass patterns.

Nakamura has issued four solo albums, each on a different label. *No-Input Mixing Board* (Zero Gravity) starts out with a froth of bubbling tones that cry out to be in a sci-fi movie, and progresses to set-pieces for synth-like tones that pop like boiling thermal mud. *Vehicle* (Cubic), the most recent disc, uses loops and repetitions that flirt with pop structure.

At home, Nakamura is a concert organizer as well as a musician. He and guitarist Tetuzi Akiyama have booked a series of improvised music concerts at Bar Aoyama and Off-Site that have established the Onkyo (literally reverberation of sound) movement of restrained, texturally oriented Japanese improvisors at the forefront of the international fluorescence of lowercase sound art. Despite their non-playing collaboration and multiple appearances together in larger ensembles, the two men didn't duet together until they toured New Zealand in August 2002. Their track on *International Domestic* (Corpus Hermeticum) shows how aggressive and off-balance a music founded on restraint can get. Akiyama leaves vast spaces between his jagged twangs and clanks, yet Nakamura seems less concerned with filling those spaces than drawing attention to them with the tiny, wavering emanations of his no-input mixing board. To hear the two men on their home turf, bend an ear to *Foldings* (Confront). This disc also features guitarist Taku Sugimoto (which makes it a virtual Onkyo summit) and visiting British cellist Mark Wastell. Its first half is quite Cage-ian - broad expanses of silence surround tiny sounds that rarely betray their origin. But as the disc progresses Nakamura assumes an adhesive role, binding his partners' reticent utterances together with tiny filaments of wiry sound.

Repeat, which is Nakamura's duo with Swiss-based American percussionist Jason Kahn, offers a more user-friendly introduction to the no-input mixing board. Their partnership dates back to 1995, when they worked together in Berlin on saxophonist Manu Kasugai's collaboration with some Butoh dancers. Like Nakamura, Kahn is a reductionist; he's cut back from the full drum kit he used to play with Universal Congress Of to a traveling set-up that includes just a couple percussive instruments, some effects, and a laptop. Their first CD, a self-titled recording on Kahn's Cut label features both men on their old instruments; their second album, *Temporary Contemporary* (For Four Ears), is their no-input mixing board's recorded debut. The duo's subsequent recordings for Cut chart Nakamura's developing mastery over his instrument. They're also some of his most accessible recordings; *Select Dialect* has an almost Eno-like squishiness, and the austere suspended tones on their latest disc *Pool* retain a pleasing tonality.

Erstwhile recordings, a NYC-based electronics label, has released two uncompromising duos that feature Nakamura. He drills white-hot whistles through Sachiko M's lacerating sine waves on *Do*, his most challenging release. *Weather Sky*, his CD with AMM's tabletop guitarist Keith Rowe, isn't exactly easy listening either, but it radiates a cruel, glacial beauty. Rowe is an especially sympathetic partner; like Nakamura, he resists making obvious gestures. Observed in concert, both men seem to be seeing how much their instruments can do without interference from the players, yet they sound scrupulously attuned to one another. Nakamura has been a key player in Erstwhile's recent AMPLIFY festivals, which were held in Tokyo and New York, and he should be all over the boxed set documenting the former event that the label is scheduled to release this fall.

PSF: I haven't heard any of your music from before repeat. Maybe you could tell me a bit about what you used to do before you started doing the no input mixing board music?

TN: In the 90's I played the electric guitar in a rock group. This rock group had compositions - songs - but contained some flavor or element of improvisation already. So it was improv rock with songs, with compositions. And also I have other group, which is my own group playing, my own writing. That was more like a jazz rock band thing, but in 1995 I stopped playing in the band. I quit both groups at the same time; I just didn't want to play the electric guitar so loud with drums and bass and other instruments, but I still wanted to play music, so I kind of struggled with solo guitar until 1997. Then I moved to the mixing board.

PSF: You once said that you wanted to make music that didn't express emotions. Was the music that you used to make before NIMB (no input mixing board) more emotional music?

TN: Not necessarily emotional but I think it conveyed some kind of human touch. Not really romantic or not really emotional or sentimental or happy, not like that. But more human, more physical. There was a lot of movement and action, I played the guitar so it was deeply connected to movement. A couple of days ago, a guy came to me after a concert in Nantes, and told me; "I read you don't want to express your emotion but I think your music is very emotional." So I told him, "It's you who find it's emotional. It's your emotion, not mine. I don't try to spray my emotion to the audience." "So, can I say it's an emotional music?" "Please enjoy your own emotion."

PSF: You also do music for dance troupes, don't you?

TN: Yes. But it's different from my music, because there is a request from the dancer. Sometimes I compose some structure, sometimes I do field recordings, or a cut-up noise, or I just improvise with no-input mixing board on stage.

PSF: Could you say a bit about deciding to use the no input mixing board as your instrument?

TN: When I stopped playing the guitar it's like I noticed, I found out I can't play the guitar anymore because I felt the guitar is not my instrument anymore. Because you need something to express, you

need some movement to play the guitar. I slowly, gradually found out this was not something I wanted to do. And then one day I played the guitar with the mixing board first, with some effects, with a couple of effects, and I would touch a string on the guitar, and touch some knobs and change parameters of effects units. In the course of this trial I found myself touching the guitar less and less, and doing other things with the mixing board effects more and more. I thought OK, maybe just unplug the guitar from the mixing board and try it without guitar. It's more focused. When I am on stage with the guitar I just stiffen, my body is really stiff and it refuses to play the guitar, so I just got rid of the guitar and I felt really comfortable. I don't know why I feel so comfortable, but I just naturally started to create music again.

I think I find an equal relationship with no-input mixing board, which I didn't see with the guitar. When I played the guitar, "I" had to play the guitar. But with the mixing board, the machine would play me and the music would play the other two, and I would do something or maybe nothing. I would think some people would play the guitar and create their music with this kind of attitude, but for me, no-input mixing board gives me this equal relationship between the music, including the space, the instrument, and me.

PSF: When I saw you play the other week, I noticed that there was no movement at all, you were very still. There was as little movement as possible. Is that something that you want, to be still, musically or personally?

TN: Uh, yes, the basic thing is I want to be honest. If I behave honest and I don't move, that's very natural for me. Yes, if I play my honest music I don't move.

PSF: What is it about stillness that makes it honest?

TN: I've never thought of that. It just happens like that. But I think it has a relationship between my music and my stillness, there must be some connection. In other words I can't move to play my music. If I try to move it's like doing two things, like moving that music and dancing, it's like two different things and I can't do two things on stage.

PSF: Is there any connection between how busy a place Tokyo is and your choosing to make music that is more still?

TN: I don't know. Unconsciously there may be a connection because I live there and make music there, but I don't make it consciously. I just want to let things happen. I don't want to force a connection because then it would not be not natural or honest anymore. I just want to let things be.

PSF: It sounds like you want something to happen and you want the music to be about what is happening right at that moment.

TN: Yes. If something happens naturally I want to keep it so, I don't want to touch it.

PSF: What do you like about your own music?

TN: Ah, I don't know. I wouldn't say I like my music, I would just say my music is very comfortable to me and very natural to me. It's not really important if I like it or not, it's just there.

PSF: What is a good sound in your music? A sound that you would want to use? What tells you that that's a sound you're going to use?

TN: Ah, that depends on the day, it depends on the place, it depends on who I am playing with. I can't say so much clearly what is my sound. I tend to dislike too-obvious effects in the sound, like 'this is the flanger sound, this is phaser sound, wah wah,' it is so obvious, it's like just a machine sound. I

prefer something anonymous, a nameless sound, this is my tendency. But not all the time.

PSF: One thing I have noticed when I listen to the records you make with other people is that you are almost like a mirror, like with Sachiko M you make music that is kind of at that frequency level. With Repeat, I've seen Jason Kahn play and you connect really closely with the sounds that he uses anyway. Is there an intention to match the other person's sounds?

TN: No, I think it's just instinct. I don't think I play, I produce my sound like a mirror too much. Sometimes I do different things than my duo partner, like I just keep my position and by giving the counterpart or partner a hard time. Yes, sometimes I think I do this. But of course I'm working again subconsciously, there must be some certain relationship between partners, not like "OK, I do this, and you do your stuff," I think that is not good. I don't like too much happiness, still I don't want to argue. I prefer a natural relationship. Not obvious, a fight is really obvious, I want to have a more subtle relationship with my duo partner. This part is difficult because it is not clear to me, most of the things around my music are very not clear for me, especially this relationship with music partners.

PSF: If something about your music becomes clear, do you still want to do it once it becomes clear? Or once something is clear, is that the end of it?

TN: I hope not! I don't know because nothing is clear so far so I can't foresee what's going to happen to me if I know everything. But I don't think there will be the day when I know everything anyway. I know very, very little compared to the things around me in the world. I don't know everything. I'm not so interested in collecting knowledge or seeking the answer, because even if I know some thing, this is still a very very small part of the whole universe. Knowledge is not really important to me.

PSF: It sounds like honesty is important to you. What else is important in your music?

TN: The reason why honesty is important for me is just because it makes me feel comfortable. I don't know. I just want to be myself: 'yes, you are you, please keep being you.' I don't want to push, I don't want to change things, I don't want to do anything (laughs). I don't know.

PSF: With the musicians that you play with from Japan, it seems like you work with a lot of musicians who do not want to overpower, do not want to be loud - I wonder if you could say a bit about how all of you came together?

TN: Again this is very natural stream or tide or wave, whatever. When you find, 'OK it's comfortable to play with this guy, OK let's do it again and again.' And again and again. So it's just not really a choice or a selection, it just happens.

PSF: Who goes to hear your music, who goes to Off Site and Bar Aoyama?

TN: It's very various. Maybe age 20 to 30. Social workers, musicians, students, artists, some professionals.

PSF: Are they people who would go to other improvised music performances? I wonder if they are people who just focus on your kind of music or they go to see a lot of different kinds of music.

TN: I think some people just come to my kind of music. But also some people just go to say pop music, or jazz, and sometimes go to my music as well. I would say that quite a big percentage of my audience is really selective, they just come to this concert. I guess. I didn't take a survey.

PSF: So the audience is people who would be conscious of art and go to art events and then go to a concert too.

TN: Yes, some of them. But I think it's the same if you go to a pop concert, some people would be from the art community. I think, some are pretty much ordinary people.

PSF: Do you see much pop music in your own music?

TN: I think my music is not really hostile or aggressive. In a way, I think my music is friendly. I think it's comfortable, some people will think it's comfortable, it's not really pushy. So in a way, my music is pop, but the difference between my music and pop music is that pop music more consciously wants to be something, like sometimes pretending to be aggressive or pretending to be hostile. Or sometimes it's OK, let's make some healing kind of music or soothing kind of music- they're aware of the things they are doing. They are aware of the things they are doing, and they want to push something, but my music just happens naturally, unconsciously, so that is the difference.

PSF: It sounds like you used to play composed music as well as improvised music. Do you play any composed music now?

TN: No, no written music, no notation. But when I improvise with someone, I sometimes try like a text. Improvisation is more like 'don't talk about music beforehand and just sit and play,' so if you talk about music before going onto stage with your collaborator (if it's a collaboration) then it's a composition. So sometimes in that sense, it's a composition. But without a music sheet...

PSF: One thing that I notice about your music that is different from a lot of improvising musicians is that you will use a lot of repeating patterns and melodies. I was wondering if you could say a bit about that?

TN: Basically, I don't listen so much to anyone else's music, so I don't have any reference to compare my music with someone else. This question is really difficult to answer. Speaking of patterns, I like loops, repetitive patterns. Not all the time, sometimes. But if you find my music is loop based, do you think that is really so? Not all the time.

PSF: With Keith Rowe there's not much repetition, it's more like a long look at the horizon. There's something that doesn't repeat but keeps happening over a long time.

TN: I don't think myself that my music is loop-based. Yes, I have several faces, but the inside it's the same.

PSF: How important are records to you? Some musicians make six records a Year and I don't know how important each one is, they just make a lot of Records.

TN: Well, to produce a record is an art work, so it's very important.

PSF: So would you say that records are different than just playing a concert?

TN: Maybe you have to practice a different kind of creativity to complete a CD, but the beginning is the same. When I record the cd it's just improvised, the starting point is the same. The difference is just that in concert, the sound will disappear and it's gone. Adios. With a CD, you have to take care of it, take care of the sound until the end. It's just different creativity.

PSF: You've started making music with the guitar again?

TN: Yes, but I'm really a beginner now. I still don't want to play the guitar like a guitar, I want to apply my no-input mixing board attitude to the guitar. It makes sense now.

PSF: One thing that people often mention when they write about your music or Taku Sugimoto's music is Zen. What do you think of that?

TN: Actually I don't know anything about zen. No! One hundred percent honestly, no.

PSF: I wondered if that was entirely a Westerner's projection onto you.

TN: Yeah! Yesterday when I played at some concert, after the concert one person came to me and asked "Are you Buddhist?" And I said "No." and she said "I'm a Buddhist." "OK, good. I'm not." It's very strange.

PSF: It sounds like it seems strange to you that people would attach that kind of value to the music.

TN: Yeah. Sorry to keep repeating it, but my music is just happening. Maybe listeners want to make some association with something else and then want to understand more deeply. "OK, he is from Japan so their must be some relationship with his tradition." Maybe in the air and in some part of my body, yes, but it's not my intention and I don't know anything about it.

PSF: How have you liked playing in America?

TN: So far the audiences are always listening, very quiet and polite. Respectful, yes. I feel quite comfortable to play in America. Maybe not all the places, but from my small tiny experience, I feel good.

PSF: Is this your first time ever in the United States?

TN: No, but it's the first time in nine years. Before that when I played the guitar, I had a couple of recording sessions in New York and small gigs there with a rock group at CBGB's. With the no-input mixing board, this is the first time. And also the first tour. It's fresh, I'm enjoying it.

PSF: Do you like touring and taking your music around to different places?

TN: Yes. And meeting people, talking to people, eating some different foods. Drinking different beers, wine. Yes, feeling the atmosphere around the audiences in different venues, galleries, clubs, I really like it.

PSF: How old are you?

TN: 40.

PSF: Then you've been playing for a long time?

TN: Yes, but I meander. I always feel like I am a beginner.

PSF: That's what Keith Rowe says. I remember reading him say in the Wire that even after all these years he's still scared of the guitar.

TN: Scared?

PSF: Yes. I think the exact words were that he still looks at it with absolute terror. It's still unfamiliar to him.

TN: Yeah, I feel the same. I wouldn't use the word terror, or fear, still my music and also no-input mixing board is something I don't know very well. Sometimes it feels like "Who are you?" Sometimes "How can it make a sound like this?" Not fear, but unfamiliar sometimes. But he's played a long time,

much longer than me.

PSF: I was interested to find out that when he isn't playing a concert he just leaves the guitar in the case, he doesn't play at home.

TN: Me too. I don't play music in my place. If I want to record music I take out my instrument and play music, but I don't practice. Practice is not important. I am not interested in practicing.

PSF: So do the no-input mixing board records include everything that you have recorded, or do you make tracks that you don't use?

TN: Do I select? Yes. I play until I feel it's enough and then I listen back. And then 'OK, I like this part, I like that part,' and then I use them on the CD. And then some parts are just waste.

PSF: I notice that with the repeat records Stefan Bettke did the mastering? Is that something that you had anything to do with, did you want him to do it or was it important to you that he do it because of any reason?

TN: Um, first of all I didn't have any tools, or a computer back then to master my CD myself. I needed someone's help. I needed to go to a mastering studio. And then I like Pole's music, I like Stefan's music, I like his CD and I found out he is a musician and a mastering engineer as well, and Jason Kahn knows him and he suggested having Stefan do our mastering. And I thought 'yeah, it's great, I like his music and he's a mastering engineer, why not?' But now I have a computer and I can do it myself. Most of the time I do mastering for myself. Maybe sometimes I let the mastering be done by someone else, I don't have to do it.

PSF: You do mastering for other people too? I think I've seen your name, maybe it was a Taku Sugimoto record? Yes, most of his CD's have been mastered by me.